

**Sermon for the 18th Sunday after Pentecost
Trinity Church
October 4, 2009**

Let me tell you about the first wedding I performed, the very first. A couple of months after I had arrived as assistant pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, fresh out of Princeton Seminary, my senior pastor went away on vacation and I was left in charge. I was hardly settled in my cubbyhole office when I got a telephone call. The man who called asked if I would conduct his wedding. We set an appointment to talk about it with him and his intended bride, and I hung up the phone. As I thought about it, it struck me that the voice on the telephone was not that of a young man.

In due course the couple showed up at the church. They turned out to be a man and woman in their late sixties or early seventies. They were understandably nervous and more than a little embarrassed, and I tried all the conversational ploys I could think of to put them at their ease. After a good bit of hemming and hawing and throat-clearing, the story came out. They asked if I thought it would be possible for them to get a marriage license that would not be published in the newspaper. Their story was that forty years earlier they had wanted to marry, but a stern pastor had refused the marriage on the ground that the woman had been divorced, citing the severe words of today's gospel lesson. So this dignified couple had simply left their church, set up a household, and lived together decently and faithfully for forty years. They had raised four children and had ten grandchildren; and none of their family had known that had never been a marriage ceremony, either civil or religious. As they began to grow older, they were afraid that should one of them die this would all come out, and it had come to be a matter of serious anxiety for them.

Long story short: We got a license from the Probate Court and had a quiet wedding in the Westminster Church chapel, with the church secretary, and the custodian, as witnesses.

According to Mark, Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery ... and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." These are strong words. They are abrasive words. They jab and jar us. They are so unlike the compassionate Jesus we always expect. It is so inviting to skip over the sentence and jump down to the part about the little children. But here those stony words stand and we will stumble over them if we try to ignore them out of our own sense of delicacy.

It needs to be said that Bible scholars have long been suspicious of this verse in Mark's gospel. Its legalistic tone is at odds with Jesus' compassionate treatment of human frailties. None of the other gospels repeats it. But rigidly and literally interpreted, those words attributed to Jesus have been the source of endless grief in the lives of many and that is something that Jesus would never have intended. These words have fostered an attitude in polite society that regarded divorce as a social stigma. Well within the memory of most of us are the times when it was a word spoken in whispers, if spoken at all.

Divorce is never a happy affair. There are all the conflicted feelings of resentment and guilt and disappointment, plus the sorrow of dissolving a family household. But in the culture of the

present, like it or not, it is a fact. As Father Turner would say, “That train has already left the station.” For ten years, I was coordinator of commencement ceremonies in a medium-large university; and in connection with the problem of admission tickets to the event, it came home to me that many students had, not two parents, but three or four! The question becomes how to deal with that fact as Christians and as a church in the spirit of a compassionate Christ.

The better course is the one Jesus took with the questioning Pharisees. When they asked if, in Jesus opinion, it was legal for a man to divorce his wife, Jesus refused to argue the question as a point of Jewish law. Without going into all the details, interesting as they are, it was a question that Jesus could not have answered without trapping himself. (I thought of Justice Sotomayor in front of the senate committee: a non-answer is far safer than one that gets ensnarled in controversy!)

But Jesus didn’t take the avenue of evasion. He had the courage to give his answer, but in so doing he took the matter to an entirely different level. The issue was not the legality or illegality of divorce. The important question was not about divorce. It was about marriage and its place in God’s plan for humanity. And it had to do with the equality of both men and women in terms of fulfillment and responsibility. He quoted those beautiful verses from the story of creation in Genesis, where man and woman were called helpers for one another to the point that the two become one flesh, one organic unity. And he ended with the statement that has found its way into the church’s marriage ceremony, “Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two become one flesh. Therefore, those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder.

You might call this sermon, “A Tale of Two Weddings.” Many years and many weddings after the one that I started with, another couple came to me in the wonderful full blossoming of romance.

As we did our wedding planning, they asked for the traditional ceremony, but with one change – one almost infinitesimal change, in fact a single letter. Instead of saying, “. . .As long as we both shall live,” they asked that the vows be, “. . .As long as we both shall love.” “Well,” I said, “we need to talk about that!” It was a fine, romantic idea, but I refused. I told that young couple, deeply in love, and as certain as can be that their marriage would last forever, that if they vowed to be husband and wife only “so long as they both shall love” it would leave a serious loophole. Who is to decide when love ceases? Show me the marriage that has never had its moments of doubt on one side or the other!

What I told them is that it is the marriage commitment that keeps love alive, not romantic love that keeps the marriage alive.

Marriage, as God has created and Christ has blessed, is the joining of lives in such a way that there is complete and mutual trust, where there are loving secrets shared and kept. Where there is the restraint not to say everything that might be said; where there is an open admission when there is the inevitable offense, and the confidence that forgiveness will be there; and where there is a mutual and unquestioned willingness of one to sacrifice for the other. It is the confidence that accepts the difference and the solitude of the other; and in the end that unity so radiated to a

family that it creates a secure home. It is a relationship so profound, so enfolding of all that makes for fullness of life, that when there comes the inevitable moment of parting, that time may come with the sure sense of something brought to completion and perfection, something for eternity. And if in the providence of God a new relationship comes along, it will be different; but the same conditions, the same rewards, and the same responsibilities will apply.

It is all a matter of relationships. So it was in the beginning, and so it is in the teachings of Jesus. The love that is from God, the love that Jesus lived and proclaimed -- That love is more than simple human affection. It has in it the strong components of trust and responsibility -- the very qualities that were present in the creation of the world and the establishment of the human family. Trust and responsibility: the strength and support that makes love possible and sustains the seamless web of life in whatever setting we want to imagine it.

Charles House
October 4, 2009